

Chapter One Building a Colony 1851 to 1902

Capt James Stirling arrived off the west coast of Australia in 1827 and reported favourably on the new lands that he found along the Swan River, which had been named by previous Dutch explorers. He returned in 1829 with free settlers and the Swan River Colony was founded. Many settlers had been tempted by the reports of abundant good land, but found a desolate place with sandy soil, not initially thought fit for agriculture. Many settlers were gentry who arrived with their carriages and servants who could not handle the conditions. After several supply ships were wrecked, the colony came close to starvation. Some left, including Stephen Henty who started the new settlement at Portland, in what is now Victoria, where the climate and soils were more like England. To attract new settlers, land was cheap in the Swan River Colony, so the settlers who remained soon took up a parcel of land and set about creating a new life for themselves and family.

This left the colonial administration without a labour force to build the necessary public works, such as roads, bridges, buildings and water supplies. By 1849, the colonial administration was requesting the home government to send convicts to supply this labour. The request was convenient for the British Government, as New South Wales had suspended accepting convicts in 1840 and transportation of convicts to New South Wales would be officially terminated in 1850, so the request was granted. As the British Army was being reduced at this time, they also formed the *Enrolled Pensioner Guard* from men (with families) who were prepared to sign on to guard the convicts, and settle in WA after their contract was finished. Capt E Henderson, Royal Engineers (RE) was chosen as Comptroller of Convicts and arrived in the colony in June 1850. His party included 150 male convicts and 70 military pensioners to act as the guard, along with their wives and children. Also included were a corporal and four sappers from the Corps of Royal Sappers & Miners to act as instructing warders.

After 21 years of settlement, the colony in 1850 had a population of 5,886 with only 1,400 living in the ‘towns’ of Perth and Fremantle. No road connected these towns with all traffic being along the river. A bridge across the Swan River at the Causeway (complete with a Toll) was the only substantial bridge on the five miles of cleared road, none of it formed or drained. Public buildings were limited to a few structures like the Roundhouse at Fremantle and the Courthouse at Supreme Court Gardens, which doubled as a church. Henderson soon took over a partly built woolstore as a temporary convict depot (now site of Esplanade Hotel) and started work on their more permanent base, which later became Fremantle Prison. In February 1851, Governor FitzGerald reported that as instructing warders, the five sappers ‘... are for this purpose admirably adapted, and do not involve one half the expense that would be incurred by the same amount of supervision by a civilian.’

I consider the rapidity and success of the works we have carried on greatly indebted to these men. I should strongly recommend that, as the establishment is increased, another detachment of intelligent non-commissioned officers of the Sappers be sent to this colony.'

FitzGerald's request was agreed to and **20th Coy, Royal Sappers & Miners** was formed, mainly with men from the two sapper companies at Gibraltar. Among the 100 men were those with a wide range of trades and they were chosen from men that had been serving for some time, so more likely to settle in WA after discharge. The main body of 65 sappers arrived at Fremantle on 17th December 1851 along with 35 wives and 88 children. They were led by Lt H Wray RE and 2nd Lt E Du Cane RE. The second party arrived at the end of January 1852 with 30 sappers, 15 women, 19 children, 118 convicts and 161 ticket of leave men, led by 2nd Lt W Crossman RE. With the company's arrival, Henderson took on the additional role as Commander Royal Engineers (CRE), taking overall control of the convicts, and the works they were undertaking under the guidance and supervision of the sappers.

The company was initially housed in improvised barracks near the whaling jetty and by the end of 1852 had constructed new barracks for the 25 single sappers along with cottages (still near the Fremantle Markets) for 52 of the married sappers. The rest were posted to the outstations. Henderson sent Du Cane to Guildford to take charge of works in the eastern districts, while Crossman was sent to King Georges Sound (Albany) and Wray supervised work at Fremantle. Instructors from 20th Coy were working with the pensioner guards at the convict depots established at North Fremantle, Mount Eliza (Kings Park), Guildford, York, Toodyay, Bunbury and Albany.

In early 1854, Crossman returned from Albany and designed the scheme to drain the lakes behind Perth, which was carried out under sapper supervision over the next few years. He also supervised the Perth/Albany road (Albany Highway) and the road which became Stirling Highway between Perth and Fremantle on the north side of the river, as well as projects at Geraldton and Port Gregory. Wray concentrated on the permanent prison at Fremantle as well as overall administration of the company. Du Cane at Guildford was working on the new bridge, the district office and warders cottages as well as having road parties working towards York and Toodyay. He was also the visiting magistrate for his district.



The main building at Fremantle Prison was completed in 1855 and occupied in the middle of the year. The principle material was limestone, quarried nearby for the walls, sandstone for the floors, Welsh slate for the roof and cell doors from England. The ironwork for the balconies and stairways was fabricated from scrap metal and the fittings from convict ships. The ornate inner gates (known as the 'Wray Gates') are marked as designed by Wray and '*executed by Sgt J Nelson, 20th Coy RSM*'. The Fremantle Prison was closed in 1991 and has since been developed as a major tourist attraction. The whole site is World Heritage listed and the Wray Gates are maintained by a descendent of Sgt Nelson who manufactured them.

The Corps of Royal Sappers & Miners was merged into the Royal Engineers in 1856 so the company became **20th Coy, Royal Engineers**. Also during 1856, Henderson got sick, and after his wife died, he took long leave to return temporarily to England. Wray took over as Comptroller of Convicts and CRE. The sappers were rotating on a regular basis with most taking their discharge in WA and others returning to England, to be replaced by new men sent from England. This led to some periodic fluctuations in the company strength and shortages of carpenters and stone masons. Lt Crossman departed in 1855, followed by Lt Du Cane in 1856 and both later retired as major generals after long and distinguished careers. Henderson returned in early 1858 and Wray left shortly after for Ceylon, before later retiring as a lieutenant general.

Wray's successor was Capt the Hon JJ Bury RE who arrived 1st January 1858 on a convict ship with 27 new sappers forming the guard, along with Lt EC Sim RE and Lt RG Thorold RE. Bury was appointed CRE and was largely independent of Henderson who remained Comptroller of Convicts. Until mid-1858, Bury as CRE had only controlled the work done by convicts on projects for the Imperial Government but with the completion of most of these, convicts were increasingly undertaking works for the emerging colonial government. So in June, the CRE took over the small colonial public works department and took responsibility for all projects. The maintenance of the Albany Road took on extra importance at this time as the steamers travelling between the east coast and England were bypassing Fremantle and coaling at Albany, so all mails were landed at Albany and conveyed to Perth along the Albany Road.

Capt EM Grain RE reached Fremantle (with his wife and children) in August 1859 to relieve Bury. Having the complete works function, Grain, Sims and Thorold were now engaged in the design of all works for the colonial government and their execution by civilian contract or convict labour. These included lighthouses, schools, the Fremantle lunatic asylum, the Fremantle road bridge over the Swan River, jetties and roads. Capt Grain reported at the end of 1861 that he had travelled 7,000 miles during his tour of duty and one of his horses had died from overwork.

The number of convicts being sent to WA was decreasing, (along with their quality) and their capacity to be used outside the prison was now limited, so the strength of *20th Coy* was allowed to fall. By the end of 1860 it had been reduced to 58 NCOs and sappers and in October 1861, it became known that they would shortly return to England without replacement. Many men took their discharge and when the company left on 27th April 1862, they only had 37 men. Both Sims and Thorold later retired as major generals. Capt Grain continued as CRE until February 1863, now with an entirely civilian staff of one Clerk of Works and a handful of clerks and tradesmen who transferred to the Public Works Department.

During their twelve and a half years in WA, the sappers of *20th Coy RE* made a significant contribution to the development of the fledgling colony. They were tasked as Instructing Warders to direct the work of the convicts who were initially picked as those with the trades most likely to be useful to the colony. The guarding was done by the Enrolled Pensioner Guards, leaving the sappers to instruct and work with the convicts, many of whom continued as civilian carpenters, blacksmiths and stonemasons after their release. Many of the sappers took their discharge in WA and together with the released convicts provided the trades base that allowed the state to expand during the later gold rushes.

They started the quarrying operations to get the stone that most of the early public buildings were made from, and started the pit sawing operations at places like Kings Park. By the time they left the colony, the made road network had increased from less than five miles to over 563 miles of formed and sealed roads including the Stirling Highway and roads to York and Toodyay. The road to Albany was formed and drained but not sealed, while some 239 bridges were built for the road network. All this road work was done without the benefit of modern mechanised machinery. The sappers and their convict tradesmen and labourers had sunk some 40 wells to supply drinking water and the convict depot included underground water storages which supplied most of Fremantle. They had constructed a network of drains in the area that is now East Perth to drain a series of swamps through Claise Brook and the area was developed as an industrial area, with the drains forming the basis of the town's sewerage system. These hygiene programs decreased the almost chronic rates of cholera in the colony.

20th Coy RE left their mark on the built heritage of Perth and Fremantle, with the Fremantle Prison, Government House and Perth Town Hall being long standing reminders of their handiwork. They also participated fully in the life of Fremantle and the state, with their band playing every summer afternoon at South Jetty. When they returned to England, *20th Coy RE* was retained in the British Army and successor units served in both world wars. In 2001, members and ex-members of the current *20 Fd Coy RE*, travelled to WA to inspect the work of their

predecessors 150 years before and they were hosted by members of the *RAE Assoc of WA*.

When the WA Volunteer Forces were first raised in 1861 there was no engineer unit. However, by the 1880s, Albany had developed as a vital coaling station on the route of steamships heading for the east coast. In an early example of interstate co-operation, the eastern states funded the installation of coast guns to defend the harbour. When *Princess Royal Fort* was commissioned in 1893, a consignment of mining stores arrived from Swan Island (Vic) to allow the installation of submarine mine defences across the mouth of the harbour. Spr CE Shaw of the *Victorian Submarine Mining Company* came with the stores but the mines were never installed. In 1894, Cpl B Goadby (on loan to WA from the Royal Engineers) arrived to relieve Spr Shaw and to supervise the submarine mining defences, which would only be installed if needed. He joined the WA Defence Force in 1896 and when the Commonwealth took over the 2,561 strong force in 1902, Sgt Goadby was the only sapper on strength. He remained as the sole army engineer in WA until the fortress engineers were formed at Fremantle in 1910. He was a prominent amateur botanist and was commissioned in 1912, serving in New Guinea with *AN&MEF* in 1914. He remained with the army until he retired as a Lieutenant Colonel in 1922.
